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# Adolescent girls' perceived readiness for sex in Central Uganda - liminal transitions and implications for sexual and reproductive health interventions

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## ABSTRACT

Young women in Uganda are at risk of negative sexual and reproductive health outcomes, in part because of sex with older men. Theoretically grounded in the concept of liminality, this paper examines perceived markers of adolescent girls' suitability for sexual activity. In 2014, we conducted 19 focus group discussions and 44 in-depth interviews in two communities in Uganda. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured tool, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews examined markers of transition between childhood, adolescence and adulthood and how these were seen as relating to girls' perceived readiness for sex. Analysis was thematic. Pre-liminal status was most often accorded to childhood. Sex with a child was strongly condemned. Physical changes during puberty and children's increasing responsibility, autonomy and awakening sexuality reflected a liminal stage during which girls and young women were not necessarily seen as children and were increasingly described as suitable for sex. Being over 18, leaving home, and occupying 'adult' spaces reflected post-liminal status and perceived appropriateness for sexual activity including for girls under the age of 18. Interventions that seek to prevent early sexual debut and sexual activity with older men have the potential to reduce sexual and reproductive health risks.

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Childhood; adolescence; adulthood; liminal transitions; readiness for sex; Uganda

## Background

With approximately 54.7% of its people below 18 years of age, Uganda has one of the most youthful populations in the world (Government of Uganda 2018). The median age of female sexual debut is 16.9 years, with 20% of women reporting beginning sexual activity before the age of 15, and 64% having sex before the age of 18

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(Uganda Bureau of Statistics and ICF 2017). Uganda also has one of the highest teen-age pregnancy rates in sub-Saharan Africa (Government of Uganda 2018), in part because girls and young women face challenges such as stigma and lack of confidentiality in accessing reproductive health services (Kipp et al. 2007; Atuyambe et al. 2015). The legal age of consent in Uganda is 18. A person having sex with an individual under this age (whether the young person has consented or not) is considered to have committed a felony known as defilement (statutory rape in other jurisdictions) and, on conviction, may be liable to imprisonment of up to 18 years. If convicted of the more serious crime of 'aggravated defilement' (where the victim is below the age of 14 or has a disability; or where the offender is a parent or guardian, is living with HIV, or is a serial offender), sentences include life imprisonment and the death penalty (Uganda Legal Information Institute 1950, 2007). In practice, the enforcement of the law is often weak with some offenders reaching out-of-court settlements with parents, particularly in poverty-affected areas (Malinga 2010). There is also criticism that the law has at times been used to regulate young women's sexuality and undermine their autonomy (Parikh 2012; Vorhölter 2017; Tamale 2001).

While adolescent girls sometimes have sex with their male peers, their disproportionately high HIV prevalence, as compared to their male counterparts, suggests that they also have sex with older men who are more likely to be living with HIV (Kelly et al. 2003; Mwinnyaa et al. 2018). Indeed, in Uganda, 3% of girls aged between 15–19 years of age are living with HIV – with prevalence more than doubling to 7.1% by 24 years of age (Uganda AIDS Commission 2015). Transactional sex, defined as non-marital, non-commercial sexual encounters or relationships primarily motivated by the implicit assumption that sex will be exchanged for material benefit or status (Stoebenau et al. 2016), has been posited as one of the main drivers of girls' and young women's disproportionate risk of HIV infection owing to epidemiological evidence of a clear association (Ranganathan et al. 2016; Dellar, Dlamini, and Karim 2015; Pettifor et al. 2005; Rositch et al. 2012; Wamoyi et al. 2016; Choudhry et al. 2015; Dunkle et al. 2004; Jewkes et al. 2012; Wamoyi et al. 2011; Luke et al. 2011). While transactional sex is not always considered by communities to be inherently exploitative, one situation in which transactional sex is viewed this way is when sex involves a minor or is considered to mislead a naïve or immature girl (Kyegombe et al. 2020). Particularly in the context of Uganda's defilement laws, this raises questions about markers of transition from childhood to adulthood and when in this process young people are perceived by others to be appropriate subjects of sexual interest.

## ***Liminality***

Originally proposed by van Gennep (van Gennep 1960) and later developed by Turner (Turner 1967), the concept of liminality, derived from the Latin *limen* or 'threshold', describes a transitional stage in a process by which a person or thing undergoing a transition occupies a position at, or on both sides of, the threshold (Oxford English Dictionary 2019). Van Gennep's work focused on rite of passage rituals that accompanied important transitions in life including birth, puberty, marriage and death during which individuals were at the threshold of entering a new phase of life

(van Gennep 1960). This process he described had three stages – pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal – with the liminal stage being a phase of disorientation, ambiguity and transition (Turner 1967).

The concept of liminality provides a useful theoretical framework for exploring perceptions of when a young person is considered by others to be ready for sex. Within this framework, childhood can be considered a pre-liminal stage. There is no universal conceptualisation of ‘childhood’ (Burman 1996; Harris-Short 2001; Twum-Danso Imoh 2019). Indeed, there is often a profound dissonance between children’s rights standards as embedded in international laws and the reality of children’s lives in countries where cultural traditions and philosophies have developed along trajectories different from those in Western societies. Varying conceptualisations notwithstanding, in most societies, adults do not approve of sexual activity with a child (Mathews and Collin-Vézina 2019). This does not mean that sex with children does not occur, but is often interpreted as abuse, worthy of legal, moral and social sanction (Finkelhor and Korbin 1988).

The liminal stage can be considered to describe puberty and adolescence when young people undergo physical, emotional and social changes and may start to explore their own sexuality (Kar, Choudhury and Singh 2015; Yurgelun-Todd 2007). Adolescence is a unique developmental period positioned relative to childhood and adulthood rather than located along a linear progression from one to the other (Jaworska and MacQueen 2015). For many writers, adolescence is likened to a phase of disorientation, ambiguity and transition in which young people often experience heightened sensation seeking and still-maturing self-regulation (Steinberg et al. 2018). It is a period that may reflect a young person’s identity as ‘not quite a child but not yet an adult’. Post-liminality, a young person may be considered to have acquired markers of adulthood and independence even when their chronological age would suggest that they have not yet fully transitioned to adult status. As ‘emancipated minors’, teenage mothers, those who are married under the age of majority, unaccompanied migrants and individuals who live in their own household and provide for themselves, are examples of young people who may be considered to have acquired the markers of adulthood (Michon 2019).

Drawing on notions of liminality, this paper uses the perspectives of community members to examine markers of transition signifying girls’ and young women’s perceived readiness and suitability for sex. In pursuit of this goal, the research sought to answer the following research question: what factors influence community members’ perceptions of adolescent girls’ readiness for sex and suitability for male sexual interest? The focus is on heterosexual sexual relationships, together with implications for sexual and reproductive health.

## **Context**

The study was conducted in one urban and one rural site in Central Uganda. Located in the Kampala District, the urban site was situated approximately 5 km from the central business district and was an informal, low-income community where poverty and informal sector self-employment were prevalent. The rural site was located in the Masaka District which lies approximately 130 km southwest of Kampala. Agriculture,

petty trade and fishing were important livelihood activities in this study site. Most houses were constructed with fired brick and corrugated iron roofs, though some were constructed from mud and wattle with either corrugated iron or thatched roofs.

## Methods

### *Sampling and data collection*

As summarised in [Table 1](#), data were collected through individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with a broad range of participants. Sampling was purposive. Inclusion criteria were that participants fell into one of the target age groups, were resident in one of our study communities and were able to give informed consent (for those 18 and over) or assent (for those under 18) to participate. In Kampala, young out-of-school participants aged 14–17 years were sampled through an NGO partner, the Uganda Youth Development Link (UYDEL). UYDEL provides services to vulnerable and hard-to-reach young people between 10 and 24 years of age. Young female participants aged 18–24 years were sampled either through one of UYDEL's community-based centres or from the community through the local government structure. Male participants aged 18–24 years, adults (aged 35+), and all participants from Masaka, were sampled through the local government structure. Members of the local council approached individuals in their community whom they knew were in the desired age bracket and made them aware of the study. Potential participants then met with field researchers and were given more information and formally invited to take part. In-school participants were sampled from secondary schools. A few men were also identified through existing research networks.

Interviews were sex-matched and conducted by two female and two male field researchers who had extensive experience researching sensitive topics and

**Table 1.** Study participants.

Gender and site	Participant age group	Kampala	Masaka	Total
<b>Focus group discussions</b>				
Female	14+ in school	1	1	2
	14–17 out of school	1	1	2
	18–24 out of school	2	2	4
	Adult women (35+)	1	1	2
Male	14+ in school	1	1	2
	14–17 out of school	1	1	2
	18–24 out of school	1	1	2
	Adult men (35+)	1	1	2
	Sugar Daddies	–	1	1
		<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Individual interviews</b>				
Female	14+ in school	2	2	4
	14–17 out of school	2	2	4
	18–24 out of school	4	2	6
	Adult women (35+)	4	4	8
Male	14+ in school	2	2	4
	14–17 out of school	2	2	4
	18–24 out of school	2	2	4
	Adult men (35+)	3	2	5
	Sugar Daddies	3	2	5
Total		<b>24</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>44</b>

interviewing young people. All researchers underwent training on the study protocol, tools and ethical procedures. Nineteen FGDs, with an average of nine participants each, and 44 IDIs were conducted and audio recorded in Luganda using a semi-structured tool. Topic guides were developed based on a review of the literature, objectives of the study and discussions with partners. Themes included individuals' life transitions and conceptualisations of childhood; perceptions of young people's readiness for sex; sexual consent; and views on sexual exploitation. Following the piloting of the tools, no significant changes were made to the questions.

### **Analysis**

Regular full-team debriefs were used to discuss the data, reflect on emerging themes, explore potential new lines of enquiry, and evaluate any unexpected findings. Preliminary findings were also discussed with UYDEL in order to incorporate their impressions into the on-going analysis. Completed interviews were transcribed verbatim into Luganda and translated into English (McLellan, MacQueen and Neidig 2003). Data analysis was thematic and complemented by constant comparison and deviant case analysis techniques (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Using the theoretical framework of liminality, our analysis explored how adolescent girls were described to transition between pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal statuses and considered the extent to which these transitions related to their perceived suitability for male sexual interest. A provisional coding frame was developed assisted by NVIVO 10 analysis software (QSR International Pty Ltd 2012) following the preliminary coding of a sample of transcripts. This coding frame included themes that were identified *a priori* and themes developed from the data. Separate coding frames were developed for the FGD and IDI interviews and for each participant group. Coding frames were finalised when saturation was reached and no new codes emerged from the data (Saunders et al. 2018). Coded data were read and analysed by theme; comparing findings across setting, sex, school status and age (Green and Thorogood 2004; Ritchie and Spencer 2004). Any names used are pseudonyms to protect participants' confidentiality.

### **Ethical considerations**

Participants aged 18 years or older provided written informed consent. Participants aged 14–17 years provided written informed assent. UYDEL provided *in loco parentis* consent for young people under their care. Parents provided written informed consent for all other young people. No parents declined for their children to participate. Ethical approval was provided by the ethics committees of the Uganda Virus Research Institute (UVRI) and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and research permission was obtained from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology. The study adhered to UNICEF guidelines on ethical research with children (Graham et al. 2013) and WHO guidelines for safe and ethical data collection on violence against women (WHO 2001). All study participants were eligible for referral if either they requested a referral, or a member of research or study staff thought that they would benefit from one. UYDEL was the referral partner for the study. UYDEL is staffed by counsellors and social workers and is well

connected within Uganda's child protection system and was thus able to onward refer to appropriate state agencies (e.g. police) or other civil society organisations. One child participant required referral support.

## Findings

In the results that follow, we outline key markers that were described by participants to accompany girls' perceived pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal status and how these related to their perceived appropriateness as sex partners and suitability for male sexual interest. No differences in perceptions emerged by geographical location.

### *Pre-liminality: protection and provision*

Life stages that were framed as pre-liminal encompassed infancy, toddlerhood and childhood. These stages were characterised as times during which a young person had limited responsibility and decision-making ability and often depended on others to provide for and protect them. Indeed, for some participants, it was upon leaving a parental home that young people were thought to progress from childhood:

'What makes a child to move from childhood is when you leave your parents and start living on your own, then you have moved from childhood to adulthood' (Patience – FGD with young women aged 18–24, Kampala).

Amongst all participant groups, sex with a child was condemned as unacceptable. Many participants advocated strong punishment for anyone found to be in a sexual relationship with a child, noting that this was defilement. A few men who had sexual relationships with adolescent girls also described considering their age before initiating sexual relationships with them:

Alfred: 'For example when I started giving that girl [money] she was too young. In fact, it was 3 years before we started having sex but even when we started, you could still think she was young.'

Interviewer: "When did you start having sex with her?"

Alfred: "She was about 16 years"

Interviewer: "Why didn't you sleep with her before?"

Alfred: "She was still very young about 13 years and when she reached 16 and her body had grown, as I had been investing my money, we started [having sex]" (IDI 28-year-old man Kampala).

This suggests that such men determined for themselves a threshold under which they would not have a sexual relationship with a child, even though by having sex with someone under the age of 18 they were still guilty of defilement and should have been held responsible for their illegal behaviour.

### *Liminality: puberty and 'in betweeness'*

While being under the protection and provision of a parent was emphasised to characterise childhood, there was no consensus in the data on a specific age at

which childhood was thought to end. Physical changes and changes in behaviour were however often described as markers of transitioning status. Young people in this phase were often described as *abavubuka* (youth), although similarly, there was no consensus on when young people ceased to hold this status.

### *Physical changes*

For many participants, children were thought to leave childhood when they underwent physical changes during puberty. For girls, puberty was described to mark the end of 'carefree' childhood and the advent of grown up risks and responsibilities and, for some, even adulthood:

'Once you have your periods then you have turned into an adult... because even your mother... tells you that "you are now mature, you are no longer a child". She continues to counsel you and tells you that you should not have sex with boys since you are mature and you can now get pregnant. That shows that you are an adult and you have stopped being a child... even if you have your periods at nine then you have become an adult because you are then capable of producing' (Faith – FGD with in-school young women, Masaka).

However, there was also a recognition, particularly amongst adult women, that undergoing puberty did not necessarily mean that a young person was no longer a child, especially when the young person was considered intellectually immature:

'A 15 or 14-year-old person is still a child, although she has already had her periods, her level of thinking is still low. As a parent, you might think that your child is now mature but the truth is that she is still a child... she can't make independent decisions' (Maria – FGD with adult women, Kampala).

This also extended to a perception amongst some, particularly female participants, that until a young person was financially independent, they remained a child, even if they experienced rites that were suggestive of adulthood such as giving birth:

'The truth is that once a person makes 18 years, then he or she is in fact an adult. But a person that is aged 15 or 14 even if she gives birth she is still a child and it is you the parent [to the 15-year-old] that will suffer with the child that she gives birth to' (Jean – FGD with adult women, Kampala).

Girls' physical changes during puberty were, however, at times described to attract men's sexual interest:

Interviewer: 'So what do men depend on to determine that a girl is mature and ready for sex?

Paulo: "In most cases, when a girl starts dressing smartly and secondly when she starts having a big bum and when she gets breast because in most cases men admire such things in women"

Interviewer: "Do men ask for the girl's age?"

Paulo: "No, never"

(IDI 47-year-old man, Masaka)

A few male participants even emphasised changes in physical appearance over age as a marker of girls' readiness for sex:



'[when considering whether it is the physical appearance or age that determines when a girl is ready for sex] most men in this community look at the physical appearance because it's the body that is required for sex, not the number of years' (Alfred, IDI- 28-year-old-man, Kampala).

Some, particularly female participants, did however recognise a difference between physical maturity and emotional maturity:

'Some put on weight, yet their characteristics are for young children. She might be fat and so on but when you find her playing dodge ball by the roadside ... you then know that she is physically developed but emotionally immature' (Nabacwa – FGD with in-school young women, Masaka).

They often also described circumstances which required young people in the liminal stages of their life to grow up emotionally though this did not necessarily always mean that they 'graduated' to a post-liminal state. In other words, they remained children but with adult responsibilities:

'She could be emotionally grown up whereas another could only be physically grown up. It is because a girl may still be in school, being taken care of, that one will only be physically grown up but then there is that one who may have had a child before eighteen years that one's emotions mature, she becomes responsible' (Kirabo – FGD with women aged 18–24, Masaka).

As the above quote indicates, in the data there was recognition that an individual could be physically but not emotionally mature or emotionally mature without yet having undergone changes of physical maturity. As with markers of childhood, the idea that a young person was 'still being taken care of' was often cited as an indication that the person had not yet progressed to a post-liminal status.

### *Changing behaviour*

Many participants also described a child's changing behaviour as a signal that they had moved to the 'next stage' in life. For some, this could be demonstrated by a child's increasingly responsible behaviour:

'The things that signify the beginning of adulthood, is that you observe a child's behaviour ... they get to a time when they actively participate in doing the domestic chores, they wake up, take a bath and so on, which was not the case before they got into this stage. Most of the times whenever you would send them for an errand they would take a long to come back home, like if you asked them to go and fetch water, they [would] take time to talk to their friends ... so they delay or they give excuses like there were many children at the well yet that is not true' (Rosemary – FGD with adult women, Kampala).

Young people's awakening sexuality was also described by some as a signal that they were transitioning from childhood even when the decisions they made could be argued to be questionable.

Robinah: 'As long as a child has started to 'play with boys' [flirt] or she leaves her parents' home - that is not to say if they have gone to live with an uncle - but if she is living with a boy then I think that she is no longer a child, she has decided on that.

Interviewer: "What if a child starts flirting with boys at thirteen years of age and moves out then?"

Robinah: “She is no longer a child’.  
(FGD with young women aged 18–24, Kampala)

While some participants described such adolescent girls as ‘no longer a child’, their new status was not always clearly defined. For some participants, particularly adult men, considering a young person to no longer be a child often corresponded with them being considered an appropriate subject of sexual interest.

### ***Post-liminality and appropriateness for sexual activity***

#### ***Turning 18 years of age***

Many participants referred to the constitutional designation of 18 years in their descriptions of when an individual attains adult status:

‘The Uganda constitution states that once a person is 18 years and above then that person is no longer in the childhood stage, because then he or she can make independent decisions. So, according to me that is what I regard as adulthood’ Dinah – FGD with in-school young women, Masaka).

Some participants also evoked the Ugandan Constitution to determine the age after which they considered it acceptable for young people to have sex given that the age of consent in Uganda is 18. Adulthood was also commonly described as a stage of responsibility and independence during which time, young people were expected to be, or become, increasingly self-reliant. Some of the rites that marked this stage were somewhat arbitrary however as they were not necessarily accompanied by real or material changes in a young person’s circumstances:

‘I think that for us girls, parents recognise you as adult at the time when you get married... that is when they say you have grown up. However, with some parents, once you complete senior six [end of secondary education], your parents stop controlling you, because then they know you are an adult. It is very difficult for a person to get to senior six when he or she is not 18 years of age’ (Dinah – FGD with in-school young women, Masaka).

Some of the rites that were described to signify adulthood were also not necessarily mutually exclusive with being a youth:

‘After a child is out of the toddler stage she enters into the childhood stage and during this stage she starts developing breast and once she develops breasts then she has matured and once she gets pregnant and gives birth to a child then she becomes an adult’ (Peace – FGD with adult women, Kampala)

Given that a girl could become pregnant at any time following menarche, the suggestion that giving birth signified adulthood was not universally held amongst all participants. This was particularly so amongst those who recognised that a pregnancy may have arisen through coercion, force, or exploitation, and did not necessarily reflect girls’ emotional, practical or financial readiness for motherhood and the adult status that this implied.

#### ***Leaving natal home and parental protection, and occupying ‘adult’ spaces***

While there was some consensus in the data on factors that denoted adulthood, there was a sense that children might ‘acquire’ adulthood owing to their circumstances:

'I think that circumstances force you to become an adult because even a thirteen-year-old girl can leave her parents and go out to start working 'okunoonya ekikumi' (looking for money). You can even find a thirteen-year-old girl on the street [prostitute], she left her parents' home and is living independently' (Mary – FGD young women aged 18–24, Kampala).

In this way, through their life experiences, some young people were considered to have progressed through the rites of earlier stages to have arrived at an adult or post-liminal status. The suggestion that a youth could obtain adult status and thus not be 'eligible' for the protections that her chronological age might otherwise demand was also described by some adult men who had sexual relationships with girls:

'You know as a person who has [sexual] experience, you can easily tell an innocent girl [not sexually active] from another person. At times you find a young girl of about 16 years but having a lot of [sexual] experience. You find [that she] behaves like an old woman and in fact she teaches you most things... I told you before that personally, I never engage a girl I meet at her parents' place but if I find her in a bar where she is working as staff...and after serving me she sits next to me and ask me for a bottle of beer not soda, then that means she is mature' (Paulo – IDI, 47-year-old man, Masaka).

Here Paulo drew a distinction between girls who were 'innocent' or still living with their parents who, he claimed, he would never engage, and girls he met in bars. This suggests that in his view, girls in the former category inhabited a pre-liminal status as they were still under their parents' protection. He was however able to justify sexual relationships with girls of the same age whom he encountered in bars as he viewed them as 'either staff or customers' which he considered made them appropriate subjects for his sexual interest, particularly if they behaved or spoke 'maturely', or asked for alcohol which suggested they could 'handle a man of his size'. In this way, girls acquired a post-liminal status having experienced 'rites' or displayed behaviours that suggested they no longer needed to be afforded the protections that their chronological age would imply. This was particularly so when they had left the parental house or they were in spaces such as bars which were perceived by some to suggest their readiness to have sex. Indeed, Paulo went further to attempt to absolve himself of responsibility and invent a justification for his behaviour to circumvent the law, even though he knew his behaviour was illegal:

Interviewer: 'But your policy is if a girl starts going to bars, then she is ready for sex?

Paulo: "Yes, she has no excuses to offer because even when the law enforcers get me, I tell them that she is staff I met in a disco'

(IDI 47 year-old man, Masaka).

## Discussion

Applying the theoretical framework of liminality, this paper explores markers of transition from childhood to adulthood among girls and young women in Central Uganda. It examines the extent to which these markers are related to girls' perceived readiness for sex, or suitability as subjects for male sexual interest. Given Uganda's highly youthful population (Government of Uganda 2018) and adolescent girls' disproportionately high vulnerability to HIV infection (Uganda AIDS Commission 2015), often through relationships with older men, it is imperative to understand factors that (may) designate girls as suitable subjects for male sexual interest.

Findings from this study suggest that childhood is broadly understood as a stage during which young people have limited responsibility and decision-making ability and are often dependent on the provision and protection of adults. While there is no consensus on what marks the end of childhood, the consensus that childhood should be a period of protection and provision offers important implications for interventions that seek to reduce adolescent girls' vulnerability to HIV and early sexual debut, highlighting potential avenues for normative intervention. The findings also offer valuable points of entry for parenting and child protection interventions which seek to protect girls from age-disparate sexual activity. Indeed, many study participants recognised the illegality of sex with a minor and advocated for legal penalties to be enforced against anyone found to be having sex with a minor. Thus by providing information, skills, guidance and local reporting mechanisms, interventions that build on existing social norms and encourage adults to protect children from sexual advances, and report instances of exploitation by older men, have the potential to be well-received and to promote the protection of children.

As girls transition from childhood, they enter a liminal state characterised by ambiguity and transition, during which they were at times described as inhabiting adult spaces and at times spaces more often ascribed to childhood. As such, there did not seem to be a clear recognition of adolescence as a unique stage in life with characteristics that are distinct from childhood and adulthood (Crockett 1997). Factors used to signify that girls were no longer children included physical changes during puberty, increased maturity and sexual awakening and interest in boys. Many female participants lamented the physical changes to girls' body shape, recognising that this made girls vulnerable to male sexual interest. Indeed, a few male participants described assessing a girl's readiness for sex based on physical attributes alone, without necessarily considering her chronological age or emotional maturity. This finding has also been noted in other settings (Buller et al. 2020; Buller and Schulte 2018; Ignacio et al. 2019). Future interventions could encourage wider acceptance of the fact that puberty is not equivalent to emotional readiness for sex and promote adolescence as a unique life stage in order to protect adolescents' rights to bodily integrity while providing them space to explore their sexuality in a safe and consensual way (Buller and Schulte 2018).

Efforts to combat intergenerational sex must also look beyond the criminal justice system as the sole means to discourage older men from having sex with underage girls. The data clearly demonstrate that many men who pursue sex with minors do so despite being aware of the potential legal consequences. Law reform to raise the age of sexual consent can also backfire, for example where these laws are used by parents to prosecute adolescent boys who are having sex with their daughters, rather than being used to hold older men to account for sexual exploitation (Parikh 2012). Thus, we recommend that efforts directed at shifting the behaviour of older men focus on building positive support for male protection of minors *in addition* to any efforts to discourage the behaviour through enhanced enforcement and education about the law. Interventions could use mass media including edutainment programming and outreach in venues such as bars and clubs to reduce normative tolerance of sex with underage girls and emphasise the legal and moral implications of intergenerational sex. They could also seek to address the social and gender norms that drive men's entitlement to sex with women and girls,

which is the subject of a forthcoming paper from this study. Such interventions would be relevant in a variety of geographical contexts in which girls' presence in certain venues is perceived to suggest their readiness for sex (Ignacio et al. 2019). They may also have particular benefits for girls from lower income families who are less likely to be in school, may be working, may not be viewed as being 'taken care of', and may thus be perceived to have become 'adult' at a younger age.

Programmes and interventions with girls that encourage critical reflection and address issues around partner choice and the structural factors that drive their sexual relationships with older men may also be valuable. These could support girls with information on their rights, particularly regarding their sexual and reproductive health, and help them to understand the boundaries of consent and coercion. Additionally they may encourage girls to examine their own motivations for engaging in sexual relationships with older men and to consider the potential consequences for their health and well-being particularly where these relationships are concealed (Wight et al. 2006). Such interventions could also build self-esteem and equip young women with the confidence and skills to navigate the social systems and norms that may encourage their obedience to older men and their submission to men's sexual advances. These include the social expectation that young people should be obedient to adults (adulthood) (Flasher 1978) and that girls and women should submit to the authority of men (patriarchy) (Buller and Schulte 2018).

### **Limitations**

This study has both strengths and weaknesses. Including a broad range of study participants from a variety of settings and differing personal circumstances enabled us to explore the study themes from a variety of perspectives. While the study benefited from the skills of highly experienced and well-trained social scientists with extensive experience researching sensitive topics and building trust and rapport with vulnerable populations, we recognise that some participants may not have been comfortable discussing personal and sensitive topics with a stranger during a single interview. This may have limited the findings of this study. That said, for some, being interviewed by a stranger might have encouraged greater openness and willingness to speak about their personal views and experiences.

### **Conclusion**

Programmes and interventions with girls and young women that address issues around partner choice and the structural factors that drive their sexual relationships with older men, and normative interventions that 1) distinguish between physical and emotional readiness for sex, 2) emphasise individuals' and communities' responsibility to protect girls from early sexual debut and sexual activity with older men, have the potential to reduce sexual and reproductive health risks.

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